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Memoir

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spiritual constellation of problems surrounding a disability Roy develops diabetes. He reacts with rage toward his situation and vents his anger on Lee, lashing out at him with frequent verbal and physical attacks, nearly killing his son with his hook. The family is torn apart by the events, a grandmother even jumping in at one point to save Lee from a beating.

Martin is a smart enough author to know that no human portrait can be painted in all black or white. When Roy isn't beating up his son, Martin depicts him as a man capable of displaying great courage and great charm. Roy uses his stare-at-the-camera-straight-on attitude to face his physical challenges and find ways to adapt. He drives a car and totes a bale of hay. He befriends the down-and-out and is an affable presence around town.

And ironically, Roy's disability also pulls the family together in an odd way. Physically, the three find a new intimacy, with with Beulah and son Lee taking on caretaker roles. They groom Roy, helping him in the shower and bathroom. They help him into his harness and hooks every morning, assist him with the few farm jobs he can't accomplish during the day. They reverse roles, the son nurturing the father, the wife for many years assuming the position of primary breadwinner.

In a different time and place, this family would have gone to counseling, gone through a divorce and enrolled their son in the Big Brothers program. Grandma Martin would have been placed in an assisted-living residence. Beulah would have declared her powerlessness in the face of her co-dependency at a 12-step meeting for adult children of alcoholics.

Instead, the Martins muddle through, looking to their religious faith for strength and eventual redemption. They cope with the reality of financial and emotional difficulties as best they can. They become academic migrant workers, living in Oak Forest, Ill., during the school year, where Beulah teaches 3rd grade, then returning to their farm for the summer.

The absence of his father's hands, of his father's love, of any real, stable home, leaves a hole in Lee's heart too large to be filled by his mother's compassion. Lee acts out, becomes a rebellious teenager, displays his own bursts of anger. Yet, as an adult looking back, the author captures his plight with insight. This is not a simple look-what-happened-to-me book, but rather a thoughtful, reflective rendering of one young man's struggle for identity.

Within his sometimes-rambling prose, Martin zeros in on suspenseful scenes and lines of dialogue that stun and stay with you for days. When Martin's parents found out that his mother, then 45, was pregnant with him, the first thing his father asked the doctor was, " 'Can you get rid of it?' " Roy remarks much later, " 'When I die, everyone will come [to the wake] just to see if they bury me with these hooks.' "

Martin's lyrical descriptions of rural and urban life make his memoir come alive. The unfolding of the cauliflower leaves in the garden, the chirp of the katydids, the sound of the peepers trilling in the night in the pond are all here. As are the sounds of Larry Lujack, counting down the Silver Dollar Survey on WLS radio, the smell of the neighbor's food wafting through the duplex wall, the clanging of pots and pans.

"How easily our bodies become us, our souls bound to the material, to the joy or grief or pain we feel through our skin," Martin writes at the close of the book. "From Our House" brings us all of the above—the joy, grief and pain of slipping inside someone else's skin.

Rock 'n' write

New anthologies sample the work of 2 early critics

By Greg Kot

THE NICK TOSCHES READER

THE NICK TOSCHES READER
By Nick Toches
Da Capo,
593 pages,
$18.95 paper

A WHORE JUST LIKE THE REST: The Music Writings of Richard Meltzer
By Richard Meltzer
Da Capo,
591 pages,
$17 paper

Richard Meltzer and a half-million hippies attended Woodstock. Most of the flower children hung out for three days in the mud. But Meltzer took one look around Max Yasgur's farm and yawned. Early on the first day, he walked out of the youth happening of the century, and an iconoclast was born. His review of an album by the performer who prompted his exit (an unfortunate singer-songwriter named Bert Sommer), reprinted in a new collection of his writings, "A Whore Just Like the Rest," is more inspired than most accounts of Woodstock itself.

Meltzer and his drinking buddy Nick Tosches, who also gets the retrospective treatment in "The Nick Toches Reader," were among the first writers to make a living as rock critics. Even in the we're-all-in-this-together haze of '60s youth culture, they reeked of every-man-for-himself attitude.

They were more rebellious than many of the purported rock 'n' roll rebels they were assigned to write about, and often funnier. Along with Lester Bangs, they weren't just writers, they were larger-than-life personalities—the room-wrecking pranksters of the nascent critical Establishment that included more refined intellectuals such as Robert Christgau and Greil Marcus and devoted fans-turned-writers such as Paul Williams and Greg Shaw. The prankster critics reviewed albums that didn't exist and eviscerated ones that they never actually bothered to play. Toches once approached rock poet Patti Smith about doing an interview and was turned down, so he made one up. Meltzer not only faked an interview with Andy Warhol, he wrote the piece as though the pale pop icon were interviewing *him*.

Facts never interfered with a good story in this gonzo approach to criticism, but then Toches and Meltzer never pretended to be reporters. The distanced perspective of the journalist was, Toches writes, a "curse and contagion" that repressed the honesty and feeling of great writing. Like the Beats, they didn't just observe the moment, they immersed themselves in it, blurring the line between subject and author, truth and fiction, high art and low, vileness and beauty, music and noise.

Like his colleague Bangs, Meltzer figured the best way to cover rock 'n' roll was to *be* rock 'n' roll: "You've gotta go straight at your own jugular . . . and take furious notes while the blood is still fresh." Not for nothing did the quintessential punk-era hucksters, the Sex Pistols, nominate Meltzer to emcee their notorious final concert in San Francisco, in 1978. On the stage at Winterland, Meltzer out-rottened Johnny Rotten by insulting the audience and was thrown out of the building by the legendary rock promoter Bill Graham ("what a rush," the ousted author extolls in "Whore").

Yet a decade earlier, Meltzer and his intoxicated rants had given concrete shape to the emerging language of rock culture. Upon reading Meltzer's review of his first album, Jimi Hendrix whispered to the author, " 'You were *stoned* when you wrote that . . . right?' " In '60s-speak, this was the ultimate compliment, an acknowledgement that Meltzer, in his own way, was on the inside, creating art every bit as provocative and hip as the rockers he was covering. His first book, "The Aesthetics of Rock," wasn't the first long-form exploration of a once-trivialized subject, but it was the most audacious and made him something of a minor celebrity. Dense and disarming, a blend of drug-culture screeds, delirious wordplay and obtuse references culled from Meltzer's philosophy studies in college, "The Aesthetics of Rock" is infuriating and inspired, in the span of one of Meltzer's patented run-on sentences, it is often both. Like rock itself, the book is visceral, tactile. It demands to be read aloud, its meandering syntax and explosive epiphanies the equivalent of a long, psychodramatic album track like "The End," by Meltzer's beloved Doors.

But Meltzer's open disdain for what he saw as increasingly greedy and self-important rock stars and their handlers did not sit well with a rock-journalism bureaucracy that itself craved mainstream legitimacy beginning in the '70s. One of the closing essays in "Whore" is "Vinyl Reckoning," in which Meltzer uses his record collection as a flimsy excuse to explain—What else?—the meaning and purpose of his life and work. He rants against the critical Establishment for denying him his true place in the rock-critic pantheon, only to wonder, "Was I ever a rockwriter?" Only Meltzer could turn a rock review into existential drama.

Nick Toches (right) once approached rock-poet Patti Smi… doing an interview and was turned down, so he made one… Meltzer not only faked an interview with Andy Warhol (abo… wrote the piece as though the pale pop icon were intervie…

Next to Meltzer's fevered self-obsession, Toches practice… pulp fiction: pomposity-deflating staccato blows aimed at t… famoth. His interviews are hilariously blunt. To Jerry Le… figure Elvis went to heaven or to hell?" To Patti Smith: "W… teenager?" To Muddy Waters: "Do you like getting drunk?" …

As a self-acknowledged scoundrel, glue-sniffer, drunk, … thief, Toches had the bad-boy credentials to match those o… and the rest. He detested Elvis Presley and the Beatles. But … roll, the welrder the better.

He was not above the occasional hack assignment (he w… bio "Hall and Oates: Dangerous Dunces") to pay the bills, b… filed rock's fringe characters with greater insight. His boo… Heroes of Rock 'n' Roll" grasps the music's essential chaos … countless official rock histories.

But the last half of "The Nick Toches Reader" finds the … different terrain (everything from his sex life to Robert De… caring to wade through the unceasing barrage of record… for inspiration. He now concentrates on biographies (see r… and novels, for which he has been justly acclaimed.

Meltzer also has published numerous non-rock books. W… saw rock as "an ever-enlarging Sea of Possibility," the last … empty room." Perhaps it's just as well. In today's more sen… rock journalism, it's doubtful that the brutally blunt first-p… criticism practiced by Meltzer and Toches would be welco… anthologies demonstrate, that's the readers' loss.

Greg Kot is the Tribune's rock critic.

CHILDREN'S CORNER

By Mary Harris Russell

Mary Harris Russell, who teaches English at Indiana University Northwest, reviews children's books each week for the Tribune.

Ages 4-6 years

HERE COMES TABBY CAT
By Phyllis Root, illustrated by Katharine McEwen
Candlewick Press, $4.99

You may be used to easy-reader chapter books as the first place a child tries out newly learned reading skills; more recently, you'll find little bones like this one, with four pamphlet-size stories inside. Each book has eight pages of text, with a sentence on each and much repetition of words. Sammy and Tabby Cat have the usual interactions, with the best ones emphasizing Tabby's nocturnal urges to play, whether Sammy wants to sleep or not. The youngest readers will feel achievement at reading separate stories and probably also enjoy taking them in and out of the sleeve, not unlike the way Tabby likes to play with yarn.

Ages 2-5 years

ABC KIDS
By Laura Ellen Williams
Philomel, $15.99

The capital letters are clear, and the words chosen to illustrate them are ordinarily within a reader's ken: "Z" for zipper, "D" for dirt. The photographs chosen, however, are special, because children are at the center. A little girl revels in her "D" for-dirty face and hands. Could "N" for nap have been a serendipitous occasion, a little model fallen asleep? If she's only posing, it's close to perfect, with a soft blanket sheltering her and the chubby, thumb-sucking fist resting softly on her face. This alphabet book isn't a prelim to a quiz, but a mirror of our lives and fancies.

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